

Holocaust Address

David L Passman

This address was delivered by David Passman on August 25, 1991, at the 50th Yahrzeit Observance in memory of the Jews of Lithuania, at the Holocaust Memorial Foundation, Skokie, Illinois:

We are a family, but only part of a family. We are not whole, and we can never be made whole again.

The Six Million (G-d rest their souls) were, fifty years ago, one-third of the Jews of the world. And so, someone has said, whenever two Jews are engaged in conversation together, there is a third, who is missing.

I think that we feel that absence -- we feel, if you will, the presence of that absence. It has brought us here this afternoon, and it is with us, at countless times and in countless places, throughout our lives.

It helps us to understand one great truth of our awful loss: that the number to keep in mind and to engrave on our hearts is not six million, or even the particular *Litvak* [Lithuanian Jew] number, which is 135,000. The number is one: one woman, taken out of her home by a stranger in a foreign uniform; one man, pulled away from his studies by a stranger with a machine gun; one baby, uncomprehending.

One *balaboste* [head of the household], one *melamed* [teacher], one *aynik'l* [grandson], one rebbe, one Sarah, one Yitzchak; one Chaya, one Mendel.

The losses of the Holocaust are not the losses of great masses of people, the equivalents of the populations of entire states and countries. They are not the losses of crowds, stretching as far as the eye can see, faceless in their multitudes. To see them that way is to see them as the killers saw them: the Jews are all alike, they in their great numbers, targets indistinguishable one from another. No: the losses are personal, the tearing of the fabric of life itself, the ripping apart of family and of friendship.

That is why each of us has a unique story to remember, and to pass along.

Permit me to illustrate, by telling you about my family.

My grandmother Ella Margowsky was one of six children, five sisters and one brother, all born in Mariampole, in Lithuania, in the 1880's and 90's. When she was 15 years old, in 1900, she became the family's pioneer, by sailing the Atlantic alone to come to cousins in Chicago. Their son Jake Passman was the man she married, and here in Chicago they stayed and raised their family.

It happened in 1907 that a group of Mariampolers here in Chicago, including my young grandfather Jake, came together to make a loan to a landsman in need. Once they had met his emergency, they stayed together, organized as the Mariampoler Aid Society, to help other *landsleit* [fellow townspeople, Mariampoler descendants],. It is that durable little *verein* [club, organization] into which I have followed my grandparents and my father, which I am honored to represent today. We are *Litvaks* who have been Americans for a hundred years.

In their early years, my grandparents brought over my grandmother's sister Ethel, and then her brother Albert, each of whom also married, and each of whom raised a son and a daughter who also married and had children of their own. Uncle Albert became the President of the Mariampoler Aid Society, and in 1944 he began to publish its Bulletin, which still has a worldwide readership; he remained both President and Editor until his death. My grandparents also brought over four of the eight children of my grandmother's eldest sister Bune, and they, too, married and raised families of their own. So has our tribe increased. A very typical American Jewish story.

But only half a story. There were three other sisters: Bune, Matele and Sarah. They, too, grew to maturity and married and raised sons and daughters. But the crucial difference, which turned out to be the difference between life and death, was that those three sisters stayed at home in Lithuania, and did not follow Ella and Ethel and Albert to America.

Of course, you will not be surprised to know what happened. In that late summer of 1941, in Mariampole and in Shaki, Bune and Matele and Sarah and their husbands and their children, the entire family, were shot by the Nazis. There were no survivors.

There is one special photograph, special for its ordinariness: the three sisters, Bune, Matele and Sarah, in middle age, dressed in nice coats and hats, almost surely in the 1930's. Half of the family, having their picture taken to send to America to the other half of their family. Mailed across the ocean, in the ordinariness of family correspondence, with a letter long lost and unremembered. But oh, the photograph! Three nice ladies in their coats and their hats. Our Bune, our Matele, our Sarah.

As the years have passed and I have learned, and I know more and understand better, I find my anger growing. They were my father's aunts, and the men that they married -- Mottl, Issur, and Aaron -- were my father's uncles. Understand, please: I do not ask to have them here with us now, because too much time has gone by, and now they would be over one hundred years of age. That is too much to ask.

But I find myself raging, that I have been robbed of half of my memories. I knew my grandparents. I knew my Aunt Etty and Uncle Jake, and I knew my Uncle Albert and Aunt Celia. I remember them fondly and well, and the sweetness of those memories is a violin song in the music of my childhood. My Aunt Bune's four American sons were like a second set of uncles to me, and they and their wives and their children are at the core of my heart.

Why, then, only half the love, and half the memories? Why not my Aunt Bune and Uncle Mottl, my Aunt Matele and Uncle Issur, my Aunt Sarah and Uncle Aaron? Why not their children and their grandchildren? Why can't I picture them, except for those little photographs? Why aren't the sounds of their voices locked in my memory, together with their sisters' and their brother's? Why are their children missing at our weddings and our bar mitzvahs? Why can't we invite them to our home, and bring gifts to their babies?

Why can't we even stand with them at gravesides, with our arms around their shoulders, in the peace of cemeteries in the security of the Illinois countryside, instead of living with the knowledge of the true horror of machine guns and trenches and mass graves, in the hostility of stony Lithuania?

Do not ask why. There is no good answer. It is not even a good question. Do not ask why.

Instead, respond to the horror, and the absence and the silence, as you and I have come to do here, today. I read to you from a recently published novel, written about other victims of a different war:

"You can do something just, and this is to remember them. Remember them. To think of them in their flesh, not as abstractions. To make no generalizations of war or peace that override their souls. To draw no lessons of history in their behalf. Their history is over. Remember them, just remember them -- in their millions -- for they were not history, they were only men, women and children. Recall them, if you can, with affection, and recall them, if you can, with love.

May your loved ones and ours rest in honored peace, and may the memory of each and every one of them be a blessing, now and forever.